

"It will be by highway transport that the complete opening up of Laos, already partly realized, will be accomplished. The first job was to connect the wide reaches of the middle Mekong with the China Sea, across the Annamite ridge which is very narrow at that point. The best road, metalled throughout and open all the year around, is that between Savannakhet and Quang Tri on the mandarin road, through Ai Lai Pass (410 meters). Another which is more mountainous and less dependable, but a little shorter, goes from Vinh to Thakhek via Nape, [102] crossing the Annamite summit at an altitude of 715 meters. Throughout its Laos section it has wooden bridges which must be rebuilt after each rainy season, with a resulting large increase in taxation. It competes with the new road from Se Bang Fay, which extends the téléferique west of Mu Gia Pass.

In the mountainous country lying between the Red River and the Mekong, road work is more difficult than in northern Tonkin. A series of ridges and high plateaus running northwest to southeast presents serious obstacles to the extension of roads into the region. Moreover, the population is scarce and the mineral resources, apparently not as great as Tonkin's, remain unexploited. However, the two capitals of Laos, Vientiane and Luang Prabang, will not long lack regular communications with the deltas of Tonkin and North Annam; during the dry season it is already possible to go by automobile from Hanoi to Luang Prabang through Vinh and the Tran Ninh plateau (the Astrid road or Colonial Road No. 7).

Finally, the inadequacy of the Mekong, which seems practically irremediable, as well as Saigon's desire for the largest possible share of the Laos trade, has resulted in construction of a road branching off the Cochin China system and going up river from Kratié. This was finished as far as Paksé between 1935 and 1937, in less than three dry seasons—thanks to the systematic organization of the work which mustered a total of 6,500 coolies in this unhealthy and sparsely populated region. The trip from Saigon to Paksé can be done in about twelve hours; it used to take six days by launch. The metalled highway is to be extended along the left bank of the river as far as Vientiane.

By means of these roads the ports of Indo-China hope effectively to rival Bangkok. As a matter of fact Thailand now draws a large part of Laos' overseas traffic thanks to the railroads which early were built as far as Chiangmai to the north and across Siamese Laos as far as Khon Kaen and Ubon; these termini are linked to the Mekong by motor highways which are steadily being improved by Thailand. "